

UNITED FARM WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE, AFL-CIO



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STATEMENT REGARDING POLICE BRUTALITY INFILCTED UPON OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF THE UNITED FARM WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE, AFL-CIO AT THE INTERNATIONAL BRIDGE BETWEEN ROMA, TEXAS AND CIUDAD MIGUEL ALEMAN, MEXICO

Approximately 700 farm workers, the vast majority of whom are United States citizens, went out on strike in Starr County, Texas on June 1, 1966, protesting wages as low as forty cents per hour and asking for union contracts and a wage of \$1.25 per hour. The strike was initially very successful. All packing sheds in the area were closed down and one grower in the area, La Casita Farms, Inc., soon after the beginning of the strike raised wages of field workers fifteen cents per hour. The principal reason that the strike has not been totally successful is the hiring by the struck ranches of Mexican citizens who have been granted I-151 visas, known as "green cards" or "resident visas," to displace American citizens on strike. These visas were granted with the understanding that these workers both reside and work in the United States, and that they not be allowed to work in areas where there are a sufficient number of American workers or where they have the effect of keeping down wages. On all three counts their employment as strikebreakers is a violation of the immigration law: these workers do not reside in the United States, but live in Mexico and cross the border daily to work as strikebreakers; there is a sufficient number of American workers in the strike area; and since they are working as strikebreakers, their employment obviously keeps the wages down.

In protest to this illegal employment of Mexican citizens as strikebreakers, approximately 70 members of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee went to the Roma bridge at about five A.M. on the morning of October 24, 1966 with the intention of trying to prevent these workers from entering the United States and the strike zone, and to call to the attention of the United States Government its duty to stop these foreign nationals from working as strikebreakers.

The members of UFWOC paid the bridge toll and walked in an orderly manner out the pedestrian walk to the center of the bridge. Throughout the ensuing events there was no violent or disorderly conduct whatsoever on the part of any official or member of the union.

About ten minutes after five the first strikebreaker walked out to the center of the bridge from Mexico. He was asked in a polite manner not to break the strike, and without protest returned to the Mexican side of the river. He was the only strikebreaker to walk out onto the bridge, and presumably explained the situation to other workers, who began to congregate near the Mexican entrance to the bridge. All other persons walking out onto the bridge were allowed to pass without any obstruction whatsoever being placed in their path.

At about 5:15 the first automobile drove out onto the bridge from the Mexican side of the river. It was ascertained that its occupants were not strikebreakers and it was immediately allowed to cross to the American side. Subsequently about eight cars carrying strikebreakers drove to the center of the bridge. Upon ascertaining that their occupants were strikebreakers, union members politely informed them of the reason they were not allowed to pass, and they backed to the Mexican side of the river. At least one of the strikebreakers expressed sympathy with the strike and signed a union authorization card. All vehicles not containing strikebreakers were immediately allowed to pass to the American side of the river. No obstruction whatsoever was placed in the path of vehicles crossing from the United States into Mexico.

At approximately 9:15 AM Starr County Attorney Randall Nye, accompanied by deputy sheriffs Raul Pena and Robert Pena, drove to a point near the center of the bridge where the union members were congregated. The union members stepped across the international boundary to the Mexican side of the bridge. Mr. Nye asked union organizer Eugene Nelson to step to the U.S. side of the bridge with the apparent intention of placing him under arrest, but Nelson remained in Mexican territory. Mr. Nye asked the union members to leave the bridge but they declined to do so. "You yourself said you were in favor of stopping the green-carders from breaking the strike," Nelson said. (Mr. Nye had made a statement to this effect during a meeting with union officials about a month before.) Chief Deputy Raul Pena then grabbed roughly at the arm of union organizer Bill Chandler, knocking him down on the Mexican side of the bridge.

Mr. Nye and the deputies got in their car and, without removing their firearms, drove to the Mexican side of the river. After a few minutes they drove back to the U.S. side of the bridge. No obstruction whatsoever was placed in their path during either crossing, and there was no loud or offensive conduct whatsoever on the part of union members or officials.

A few minutes later two Mexican officials walked to the center of the bridge and ordered union members onto the American side of the bridge. Union members placed themselves at the exact center of the bridge. One of the Mexican officials approached union organizer Eugene Nelson and pushed him onto the American side of the bridge. Mr. Nye then ordered the deputies to start arresting the union members and officials, starting with Nelson. Two deputies grabbed roughly at Nelson and he sat down on the bridge. The deputies grabbed his arms from behind and began dragging him in a rough and brutal manner toward the police car about forty yards away, allowing his feet to drag along the sharp metal grating of the bridge; when one of his shoes came off they continued to drag him across the rough metal grating. Arriving at the police car, one deputy grabbed roughly at the front of his trousers, ripping open the front of his trousers and ripping off the buckle of his belt. ~~himxxandxxshoxxxdxxhimxxsughi~~ Another deputy handcuffed him in an extremely brutal manner, twisting the handcuffs unnecessarily and cutting one wrist. The two deputies then lifted him and shoved him roughly into the police car, and took him to the Starr County jail. When he was asked what he was charged with, deputy Raul Pena told him he would have to ask Mr. Nye.